Historicizing the Spellcheck Attribute

Katharine Gruber

University of Minnesota

Author Note:

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**Introduction**

The spellcheck attribute has been available to web authors since February 2009 (Pilgrim, 2009, “A Brief History of the Spellcheck Attribute,” para. 9). It is new to the HTML5 standards and works with specific elements. They are the <textarea> and <input type=text> (accept passwords) elements. Several browsers support this attribute such as “Firefox 2.0, Safari 5.1 and Opera 10.5, Microsoft Edge 10.0 and Google Chrome 9.0.” (W3Schools, https://www.w3schools.com/tags/att\_global\_spellcheck.asp ). However, the W3Schools website lists it as a Global attribute which means that it “specifies whether the element is to have its spelling and grammar checked or not” (W3Schools, 2018). Some elements such as <p> or the paragraph tag can be paired with contenteditable and the spellcheck attribute such as in the following example: <p contenteditable=”true” spellcheck=”true”>content added/p>. For the attribute to work with the browser, its value equals either “true” (spelling and grammar will be checked) or “false” (spelling and grammar won’t be checked).

**Examples**

**Paragraph**

<p contenteditable=”true” spellcheck=”true”>content to be edited and checked/p>

**Form**

First name: <input type=”text” name=”fname” spellcheck=”true”>

**Text area**

<textarea contenteditable

<!DOCTYPE html>

<html>

<body>

<form action="/action\_page.php" id="usrform">

Name: <input type="text" name="usrname">

<input type="submit">

</form>

<br>

<textarea spellcheck="true" rows="4" cols="50" name="comment" form="usrform">

Enter text here...</textarea>

<p>The text area above is outside the form element, but should still be a part of the form.</p>

<p><b>Note:</b> The form attribute is not supported in IE.</p>

</body>

</html>

**How the Spellcheck Attribute Works**

The spellcheck attribute tells the browser to check or not to check for spelling. Browsers “read” the text and compare it to a stored dictionary database. Safari offers suggestions for misspelled words “when the attribute is included and set to “true” (Wufoo, n.d. para. 2). The Wufoo website told how browser differ when the spellcheck attribute is present and set to the value of “true.” Some browsers, like IE10, Chrome and Opera check the word once it is typed and the punctuation or space has been added after the word (Wufoo, n.d.). In Firefox, if the onblur element (used in forms to inform the input field when the user leaves input box) is used with the spellcheck attribute set to the value of “true,” “Firefox spell checks the rest of the document” including “elements that are by default spell checked” (Wufoo, n.d.).

**Proofreading**

The art of writing well with meticulous attention paid to recording records of rulers and merchants meant that the writer had to proofread their work. The exact point in history when proofreading for content, context, spelling and grammar probably dovetails with the written histories of cultures. The Chinese are credited with discovering printing “by the end of the 2nd century C.E.” (Encyclopaedia Britannica, History of Printing, para, 1). As printing developed from carved wood blocks as early as 764–770 in Japan, to the first movable type created from a mixture of clay and glue, by the “Chinese alchemist named Pi Sheng” around 1041–48, the time and effort needed to print would make proofreading mandatory (Encyclopeadia Britannica, “History of Printing”, para. 4 and 5). The first mention of proofreading was discovered from a “contract of 1499 held the author finally responsible for correction of proofs” (Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2018, “proofreading”, para 1.).

Today there is a mix of proofreading and marking up ones writing with the manual markup symbols and spell checking manually with one’s eyes. Sometimes reading a manuscript backwards, from the end to the beginning, one word at a time catches more mistakes because the brain doesn’t self-correct. There is a crossover from manual proofing texts to electronic correcting and markup. Sometimes computer programs correct for spelling and grammar to catch many mistakes. However, they aren’t accurate and can’t be relied upon to catch every mistake at this time.

**Spellchecking Programs**

The first computer spell checker programs began development around 1957 by Les Earnest of Stanford University (Sertiadi, 2014, p. 1). By 1971, “Les Earnest and Ralph Gorin creates the first spell checker program, which displays corrected alternatives of misspelled word that differed by one letter and small transpositions” (Patel, 2014, p. 9). These programs have progressed from merely underlining misspelled words to giving possible suggestions and autocorrecting while users type. Many digital devices support or feature spell checking functions.

Hass (1999) researched old and new technologies with case studies to show how these technologies are incorporated and used in people’s lives. She quoted Bijker (1995) stating “technological development and change is best understood as multidimensional , and multifaceted—a web that is built in fits and starts, and cannot be properly understood in hindsight” (as cited in Hass 1999, p. 221).

In the case of spellchecking, the “fits and starts” may be related to their reliability. Today, spell checkers are used as a first edit because they miss so many things. Until they’re developed to catch many more spelling or grammar mistakes and distinguish between homophones through context, they may never substitute for skilled human copy or technical editors. At present, people rely on a combination of computer spell checking and human editing.

**Consequences of Relying on Spellchecking Programs**

Teachers concerned that students rely too heavily on the spell check functions, worry that students won’t develop the reading, writing, and speaking skills necessary to function society. On the other hand, sometimes these programs can help people with Dyslexia ( Nordquist, 2017).

“Psychologists have found that when we work with computers, we often fall victim to two cognitive ailments—complacency and bias—that can undercut our performance and lead to mistakes” (Carr, *2013, para. 11).*  Will our reliance on automated spell checking improve our writing abilities or decrease them over time?

<p contenteditable=”true” spellcheck=”true”> historicizing</p>

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Proofreading history Historicizing

Proofreading with rulers, editors and auto spell checkers

Liabilities of relying on auto spellcheckers and grammar checkers.